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ABSTRACT

This paper uses data drawn from two projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of England and Wales. It covers the years 1990-94 and examines the effects of the Education Reform Act, which allowed state schools to "opt out" or leave the control of their Local Education Authority (LEA) and still receive funding. Such schools are designated grant-maintained (GM) schools and are autonomous, incorporated institutions that own their land and buildings and manage their own budgets and personnel. The report includes interviews with the policy's political advocates, with public critics, with civil servants responsible for taking forward legislation into administrative action, and with LEA officers in local authorities directly affected by the policy, and it includes a field-based study of two local education markets to assess the impact of GM schools on adjacent maintained and independent schools. The paper is divided into five sections. It begins with a brief consideration of the poetics of policy analysis and explores the idea of a policy's "nature history." The second and third sections consider the origins of GM schools and their growing pains and troubled early years, whereas the fourth section examines the later stages of these schools' development and subsequent transformation. The last section discusses the policy's contemporary significance. (RJM)

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# OPTING OUT OF OPTING OUT: A NATURAL HISTORY OF A POLICY THAT FAILED

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# OPTING OUT OF OPTING OUT: A NATURAL HISTORY OF A POLICY THAT FAILED

by

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## Background

The Education Reform Act 1988, enabled state schools in England and Wales, after a ballot of parents, to apply to the Education Secretary to 'opt out', or leave the control of their Local Education Authority (LEA) and receive funding, by grant, direct from central government. As autonomous, incorporated institutions, grant-maintained (GM) schools, through their governing bodies, own their land and buildings, employ and dismiss staff, manage their own budgets relating to capital and recurrent costs, devise their own in-service programmes of staff development, and arrange their own admission policies within limits pre-determined by central government guidelines. Since its introduction though, Conservative governments, in the period 1989-1997 progressively adjusted many of the original features of GM schools policy. For example, GM schools were advantageously funded via capital and development grants not available to local maintained schools, the government extended the capacity of GM schools to determine their own recruitment policies, has actively encouraged them to become increasingly selective by ability or aptitude, and permitted 'promoters' to create, and receive state funding for, new GM schools (DfEE/WO 1996).

GM schools are constrained insofar as they are required to teach the National Curriculum and participate in the associated testing procedures. Unlike US charter schools, therefore, they have no pre-determined goals (relating either to student achievement, or curriculum innovation) to meet as a condition for them to remain autonomous from local governmental control.

The limited autonomy that GM schools enjoyed was linked by its advocates to three interrelated benefits, which justified the policy's origin and development. First, GM schools policy was to help diversify local school provision, thereby increasing parental choice. Second, GM schools were intended to enhance competition with the state sector and thus help raise standards of student achievement. Third, the policy would locate key decision-making at the level of the school and thus foster greater efficiency on the part of GM schools and also increase their capacity of individual schools to recognise and respond to local needs. While these objectives were evident at the policy's outset, a fourth dimension was increasingly argued for as the GM schools initiative unfolded, and that was its effect on reducing the power of LEAs in the planning and provision of education. For some on the 'new right', this increasingly became the key benefit arising from the policy.

In general, the GM schools policy can be interpreted as an important element in moving education from a command-orientated system to one which was increasingly fragmented, competitive and market regulated. It therefore connects with other similar

policies manifest in health and welfare provision in the UK. Judged by the numbers of schools that have opted out, however, the policy has not been a success. Of the 24,000 school in England and Wales, just over 1100 schools or about 4.5%, have opted for grant-maintained status. Successive Conservative Prime Ministers expressed their strong support for the policy and also looked forward to the day when all state schools opted out. Given the degree to which this policy was promoted then why has the policy achieved so modest numerical results?

It is against this background, then, we explore the development of a flagship policy under the last Conservative administration, consider the contextual factors which influenced the policy' development, evaluate its impact on the education system in England and Wales and reflect on the policy's subsequent adaptation under the present Labour government.

This paper draws on data arising from two projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, over the period, 1990-1994. Those investigations included interviews with the policy's political advocates and its public critics, with civil servants responsible for taking forward legislation into administrative action, LEA officers in local authorities directly affected by the policy, and also an intensive field based study of two local education markets where explored the impact of GM schools on adjacent maintained and independent schools (see Fitz, Halpin and Power 1993: Halpin, Fitz and Power, 1994)

The paper is divided into five sections, the last four of which derive front the metaphors discussed in the next section of this paper. We proceed, first, with a brief consideration of the poetics of policy analysis: to explore what kinds of metaphors and image can we deploy in narratives for the purpose of illumination and as a rhetorical technique of persuasion (Atkinson, 1990). Here, we discuss, briefly, the idea of a policy's 'natural history'. The second section considers the origins of GM schools policy, and third section discusses its growing pains and troubled early years. In the fourth section, we examine the later stages of its development and subsequent transformation. The fifth, and last section, provides an overview of the policy's contemporary significance.

**Policy, narrative and poetics**

Much of the educational policy research reported in the UK has a common rhetorical structure which derives directly from how the policy structure and process is conceived. The basic model proposed in this work has its metaphorical roots in Bourdieu's 'fields' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), Bernstein's 'arenas' (1998), Firestone's 'ecology of games' (1989), Fitz is et al's idea of 'levels' (1993) and Ball & Bowe's 'policy cycle' (1992). Each of these metaphors are concerned with the fundamental problem of the relation between policies generated in one arena, as a set of ideas proposals or directions, designed to influence the ensemble of relations or practice in another, and their realisation. They are also concerned to account for the passage of policy texts through time and through space and to recognise the lack of certainty that proposals will be adopted in the form in which they were intended. Within this general framework, the policy process is characterised by inclusiveness, as the model embraces a recognition of all the agents and agencies at each level as

contributors to the policy-making. It also embraces the idea of continuous interaction between agents and actors within and between levels.

The dominant metaphor in this paper, however, and hinted at in the title, is the life cycle, the birth-to-death narrative structure. While in part its use is provocative and playful, there is, nevertheless, a serious analytic intent. In one sense, policies are like species, insofar as they are introduced to, or inhabit, terrain on which they have to co-exist and compete with others. Although the next step, to a neo-darwinian perspective of the survival of the fittest, may be, rhetorically, one step too far, environmental support, pre-existing territories and the relative vigour and reproductive capacities of co-habitees are all features which influence the survival of newcomers in nature and in the policy arena. The educational landscape in the UK, certainly, features the half-dead and, the skeletal remains of, policies that have withered or failed. The life-cycle was also metaphor was attractive because policies, like species, have origins, spates of development then longer periods of adaptation and survival, and/or, various forms of demise. Like the dinosaurs, the causes of policy decline and/or extinction are many: the cause of death might have been one too many a tar pit to negotiate or, a new a dangerous and dangerous predator or, some generic problem in the gene material which pre-disposed early termination.

The other term we use rhetorically in this paper is the notion of policy failure. As this paper will show, as measured by the number of schools that opted out, the policy, fell far short of its advocate's expectations. However, the number of GM schools, we argue, is not the true measure of its impact on the system. That being said, the policy had a high period, 1989-97, of some eight years, whereas now, GM schools now face an uncertain future.

**Origins**

That schools should be given powers to opt out of local authority control was one of a number of policies favoured by neo-liberal elements within the Conservative Party concerned to establish the market as the organising principle in the provision of education. For groups such as the 'No Turning Back Group' and the Institute of Economic Affairs, it offered the promise of the diversification of the system, introduction of new and competitive element into the system, diminished powers for LEAs, and the creation of new schools more directly sensitive to the needs and preferences of parents (Fitz, Halpin and Power 1993).

One source of the idea of that schools should be free to manage their own financial, organizational and educational affairs with the minimum of interference, is long-standing corporate practice, in the private sector. One of the key advocates, and sometime ministerial adviser, Stewart Sexton, said he drew on his own experience with Shell Oil and its policy of devolution of responsibility to those in charge of on-the ground operations. We note a similar argument in Australia where, Don Hayward, education minister in the state of Victoria, claimed his time at General Motors in Detroit had impressed on him the benefits of devolved management systems (Caldwell and Hayward, 1998). Subsequently, Victorian schools achieved a considerable degree of independence from the state education department.

The legislative and administrative policy form which emerged in 1989, though, was an

*enabling* framework, which gave central place to the parental ballot in the determination of which schools opted out and when. In consequence, that became the key regulator of the pace at which the policy was to develop. There were those, such as Mrs Thatcher, the-then Prime Minister, who were keen to see the demise of local authorities but they had stout defenders within the Conservative Party, where they seen as crucial elements of local democracy and not simply as part of the 'educational produce-dominated, establishment'. In placing parental ballots at the centre of the policy, in line with the 1988 Act's overall purpose of extending parental influence in education, direct control over the speed of the policy's growth passed from central government to the serendipity of local ballots of parents.

Alongside other measures which enabled central government to regulate what schools taught, and at what pace, the 1988 legislation also introduced a national curriculum and associated scheme of national testing, measures which further diminished local educational authority (LEA) control over schools. As well, there was a general devolution of management responsibilities to all maintained schools, including those that remained in LEA control. Known as Local Management of Schools (LMS), these arrangements pushed the great majority of finance out to the direct control of schools. In England for example, between 90-95% of the aggregated schools budget is now controlled by schools. In Wales, the figure is 95%. The capacity for LEAs to plan, provide and support education was, therefore severely, curtailed. This meant that the independence of action, enjoyed by newly established GM schools, was broadly matched by the control of finances and organization devolved to LEA schools. It was not clear, in the early period, what the advantages there were in opting out, except for those schools, where, staying with an LEA, would have almost certainly led to closure or a change in their character.

For school under threat of closure, amalgamation or re-designation GM schools policy provided an escape route, a means to survive independently outside the LEA. It was these schools, which our research and, that of others, suggests were the first to opt out (see also Bush et. Al., 1993: Campbell, et. al., 1995). The government, nevertheless, continued to promote the scheme on the basis that its attraction lay in the independence of action it gave to schools and parents. Some robustly independent and entrepreneurial heads, and also some schools, which has a long troubled history with their LEA, certainly took the opportunity to leave the control of their LEA.

For a number of reasons, and these varied considerably in their local combinations, the policy had adifficult and, somewhat prolonged, infancy. It did not grow at the rate at which its supporters hoped. For reasons, which we believe sometimes bewildered GM advocates, schools and parents seemed attached to the notion of schools controlled by LEAs. This, though, was interpreted as evidence of 'a culture of dependency' by some politicians and supporters of GM schools. The vigorous defence, by LEAs, of their historic role in education and the support they received at the parental ballots, the lack of clear advantages to most schools in opting out, a concern for schools to work collaboratively as a local system and, the sheer pace of change demanded of schools by other elements of the 1988 Act, were all factors which influenced schools' decisions whether or not to do GM. Consequently, in the first year of the policy, only a few schools sought , and achieved GM status. Ministers were concerned, even at an early stage, that their new flagship policy was in some trouble. Indeed, at the Conservative

Party conference, a year and half after the introduction of the first GM schools, the policy was adapted to enable a larger number of schools to seek GM status.

Our intensive field research on reasons why parents chose schools also confirmed the larger point that new policies have to contend, at the local level, with long established loyalties, patterns of use, local informal reputations about the relative effectiveness of particular schools and these are not easily overcome because school changes its status. This is part of the environment within which new policy initiatives must survive. These local factors act as regulators of the scale and the pace of the policy's on-the-ground effect. One significant outcome of all this was that at the end of the first year and half, only 108 schools had held ballots, in which about half the schools had returned a 'Yes' vote.

**Growing pains**

Lack of numerical success signalled, in some quarters, lack of popular appeal, while in the government's ranks, other voices indicated, as we noted earlier, that it was further evidence of the pervasiveness of the 'dependency culture'. In successive Conservative Party conferences, in order to take forward the government's ambitions, there were successive policy adjustments aimed at enabling more schools to opt out. In addition, there were also financial rewards for schools which had previously opted out, and for those which were to do so later. These came in the form of capital and special purpose grants that were not available to LEA schools. Grants of several hundred thousand pounds were made available for new classrooms, science and technology buildings, for new sports and performance facilities, and for major repairs. One study recently reported that one its sample GM schools gained nearly £50,000 in-service funding for staff development as a result of opting. In the competitive local markets which had emerged in our study areas, post-1988, new buildings certainly enhanced the market reputation of the GM schools. Moreover, recurrent funding to GM schools, for payroll and other running costs, were set at maximum levels, and in some cases they were 'double funded' (1). While this increased the attraction of GM status, it also led to tensions between GM and LEA schools, where the latter were increasingly conscious of the funding disparities that existed between the two sectors, and, importantly, the market consequences.

From 1993 on, following additional legislation in that year, and further consolidated in a government White Paper in 1996, GM schools were increasingly allowed to change their character, via adjustments to their admissions policies. In practice, this enabled GM schools to become more academically selective. The first schools to move down this route were allowed to admit up to 20% of their intake on the basis of academic entrance examinations or aptitude tests. This figure was increased to 50% in the 1996 White Paper.

In the period 1990-96, then, central government increased its efforts to expand the number of GM schools and it did so by treating the GM sector rather more favourably than schools in the local maintained sector. It also continued a sustained attack of LEAs, notably those in Labour-controlled authorities, for excessive bureaucracy and for using scare tactics, in their parental ballot campaigns. The environment, in this period was dramatically pro-GM as the government struggled to support GM schools.

The numbers, however, suggest a modest flow of schools into the GM sector, with one or two periods of more hectic activity. Nevertheless, some of the features we noted earlier, which seemed to constrain the policy's expansion, still held sway and the majority of school heads, governors and parents were not moved to accept the advantages which seemed to attend GM status.

While there were over 50 ballot declarations in the first six months of the policy (i.e. between November 1988 and April 1989), the number reduced considerably in the following year and a half, during which time only 58 schools sought to opt out. However, at the end of 1990, and largely as a consequence of the waiving of the rule that only allowed schools with over 300 pupils to seek GM status, there was an increase of interest in the policy, which was sustained at relatively high levels during both 1991 and 1992. By January 1993, 836 ballots had been held, and in those 181 schools voted against opting out. At this time 337 schools were operating as GM schools, a further 26 had their applications for GM status approved by the Education Secretary, and just over 220 more had voted in favour of opting out and were in various stages of application. This was probably the high point in the policy's progress.

On the other hand, throughout 1993 and 1994, interest in the policy declined dramatically. For example, in September and October 1993 there were five times fewer ballots than in the same months in 1992. Moreover, during this period 'No' votes outnumbered positive decisions by three to one. Throughout the academic year 1993-4, just 52 secondary schools voted to opt out compared with 299 during the previous school year. These trends have continued. In 1994/5 only 13 secondary schools voted to opt out as against 17 that voted 'NO'. That pattern was confirmed in 1995/6 when 13 schools chose GM status but ballots returned a 'NO' vote in another 22. The decline in ballots also applies to primary schools.

Alongside a significant reduction in the number of schools seeking GM status is another awkward trend at this time, namely the uneven impact of the policy nationally. Opting out has increasingly become concentrated in a few English LEAs. In 1994-95, for example, just 15 of them had more than 20 GM schools in their area, while 31 others do not have one at all. Moreover, three local authorities (Essex, Kent and Lincolnshire) account for almost 30% of the existing total of opted-out schools. Indeed, less than one dozen LEAs have 'lost' more than 50% of their secondary age pupils to the GM sector. In fact, Kent LEA, which had over 60 GM secondary schools within its administrative boundaries, remained responsible for the education of more than 50,000 post-primary age pupils, making it still one of the largest LEAs in England. While other LEAs such as Gloucestershire have lost large numbers of their schools, it remains a highly concentrated pattern of distribution today. In Wales the policy is less advanced. Of the 1924 state schools, only 16 or less than 1%, have opted out of local authority control and these are responsible for the education of 2% of school-age pupils. By 1996, of the 103 LEAS in England, 89 had GM schools within their boundaries.

The pattern was further complicated by creation of a Funding Agency for Schools, whose remit was to administer grants to GM schools. It also had a further function. It was empowered to work alongside LEAs which had lost 10% or more of their primary

or secondary schools. Within an LEA, where 75 % of schools were GM, the FAS replaced the LEA and, assumed its responsibilities in local planning of school provision. As a consequence, the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS) shared responsibility for the planning of schooling in just under 50 LEAs. In three of these Hillingdon, Kent and Bromley, the FAS controls entirely the planning and provision of secondary education.

It is difficult to identify general features which account for the pattern of opting out and for the pace at which the schools left control of their respective LEAs. However, our own research (Halpin, Fitz and Power, 1994) and the findings of related research (Bush et al, 1993; Campbell, Halpin and Neill, 1995) suggest that there is a temporal frame which underpins the diversity of school decisions. Broadly, those, which left their LEAs early (1989-91), were more likely to do so to avoid closure, amalgamation or redesignation. Those who opted for GM status post-1992 were more likely to cite independence from LEAs and advantageous funding as reasons for seeking greater school autonomy.

**Troubles and tar pits**

By the time the government launched its 1996 White Paper, Self-Government for Schools, there were about 1100 GM schools in operation, well below what the government had hoped for. Indeed, one ever-optimistic Education Secretary declared he was prepared to eat his hat if the number of opted out schools had not reached 2000 in number by the next election, due to be held in 1997. This coincided with discussions at central government level about the possibility of abandoning parental ballots, and offering church schools 'fast track' procedures to achieve GM status. The White Paper set out clear proposals for the further development of the GM sector, via greater opportunities for GM schools to change their admissions policies. There was also further encouragement for them to become academically selective, or to specialise and become 'technology schools'. The white paper also gave further support a new kind of GM school. The proposed 'promoters' GM schools, aimed to enable agencies other than LEAs, to create and receive state funding for new schools. Introduced in the 1993 legislation, and consolidated in 1996, promoter schools sought to address the inherent weakness of the post-1988 market arrangements by allowing new kinds of schools to enter and compete with established maintained schools for students in existing systems of provision. The government was anxious for this legislation to move through rapidly parliament, for there was to be a General Election, by May, 1997, at the latest, and the government was concerned to have its latest restructuring proposals in place.

While the new legislation gave rise to nine new 'promoted' GM schools', some religiously affiliated, and including the first state-supported muslim school, previous trends prevailed. In the last three years about one hundred new GM schools were established, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 No. of GM schools in England and Wales, by sector

| | 1995-96 | 1996-97 | March 1998 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Primary | 448 | 488 | 506 |
| Secondary | 642 | 664 | 658 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Special | 9 | 18 | 20 |
| Promoters | | 2 | 9 |
| FAS | | | 2 |
| **Total** | **1099** | **1172** | **1195** |

We have no figures for other schools, which, on the basis of a 'Yes' vote, have an application still before the Education Secretary. What the above figures do suggest though is the negative effect on the policy's progress of the Labour Party's election promises to review the future of GM schools, reduce their financial and other advantages, and give LEAs a larger role in the local planning and provision of education. Although Labour pulled back from the promising the dissolution of GM status, it was widely interpreted that its administration would be less than GM-friendly.

If there is a tar pit for GM schools, and this may be stretching metaphors too far, then the return of a Labour Government in May 1997, is the GM schools equivalent. Under the control of a Labour Education Secretary, unless approval had already been given, it was unlikely that any further applications for GM status would be successful. Moreover, the government moved quickly to close off state funding previously given to private organizations, such as the Grant-maintained Schools Foundation, which were established to support the operations of GM schools and also further promote GM schools policy. The money, previously ear-marked, i for these organisations, some £700,000, was employed to support summer literacy schools.

But if the incoming government mired the policy, like tar pits, it also preserved some of the policy's features in its programme, which set out the map for the future governance of schools. The 1997 White Paper, Excellence in Schools, (DfEE, 1997), foreshadowed 'community schools' which would broadly correspond in kind and governance with existing local maintained or LEA schools, 'aided schools' with resemble present church schools and, 'foundation schools'. The latter, would enjoy broadly the kinds of autonomy presently experienced by GM schools, but more LEA representatives would be present on their governing bodies. Our view here, is that the local ballots, held to establish GM schools, were forms of local democracy, however muted, which gave GM schools a popular legitimacy, that central government was unlikely to find easy to overturn.

GM schools, then, remain as a feature on the educational landscape, though for how long and, in their present form, will be determined by legislation at present before parliament. The policy was not successful in numerical terms but in the impact it has had on the governance of education in England and Wales, we argue that its impact has been substantial.

**Footprints on a landscape**

Our evaluation of the policy is most economically presented via summaries of the findings of our two research projects on GM schools policy.

Our first research project, conducted between 1989-92 (Fitz, Halpin and Power, 1993a) led us to reach four main conclusions about the short-term impact of opting out.

- It was not leading to the development of a sector of schools that manifested either distinctive or mould-breaking characteristics.

- It had contributed little to improvements in parental participation in the life of schools or changes in how children experience education.

- It had not widened choice. Indeed we found in areas where GM status had preserved selective education, it had led to a restriction of choice for parents.

- It had constrained considerably the capacity of many LEAs to plan rationally for the removal of surplus places to the extent that their schemes for school reorganisation were frequently frustrated by some of the schools involved seeking and obtaining GM status.

That research also identified the Conservative government's increasing resolve to foster opting out as major strategy for the restructuring of education. In response to the relative small number of schools which sought and achieved GM status, measures were progressively and cumulatively introduced soon after the policy's establishment aimed at encouraging schools to opt out (Fitz, Halpin and Power, 1994). The policy features can be interpreted as signals of the government's determination to defend, sustain and promote, at considerable political cost, an educational policy which has not taken off on the scale predicted. Indeed, the constant readjustments to the original GM schools policy some of which we have noted above, has also been one of its defining characteristics.

While our first study of the policy investigated chiefly its systemic effects, our second conducted between 1992 and 1994, was more concerned to assess the extent to which the autonomy enjoyed by GM schools enables or constrains in ways which contribute to changes in their organisation and working practices and adjustments to educational identities which make them distinctively different from locally managed LEA maintained schools.

The chief findings of our second study are:

1 GM schools enjoy a regulated autonomy and exhibit a tendency towards managerial orthodoxy including organisational structure. The acquisition of GM status is followed by a noticeable shift in power upward to headteachers who consequently are well placed to 'manage' both staff and governors.

While senior managers in GM schools force most of the pace in policy formulation, middle managers, especially heads of subject departments, are significant budget holders. However, their capacity to influence whole school policy is chiefly exercised in that area of the curriculum for which they are responsible. To that extent, their impact on whole school policy is indirect rather than substantive. Similarly, there is no evidence to indicate that opting out is transforming the work of classroom teachers;

2 None of the GM schools in our sample are using the freedoms associated with

opting out to engage in wide-ranging consultations with parents about their preferences and concerns. To that extent, opting out is not leading in these schools to greater parental participation, the involvement of increasing numbers of parents in fund-raising excepted. In this sense, GM schools may well be in the embrace of another form of 'producer capture'.

3 In local competitive settings, GM schools tend to consolidate around pre-existing teaching missions. None radically redefines their purposes or attempts new forms of curriculum development or delivery. Instead, curriculum conservatism and traditional teaching are more the norm;

4 Pupils with extended experience of being educated in a GM school are frequently very aware of their school's relatively elevated status and of their responsibility to uphold its local reputation. However, as in our first study of the policy, we failed to find high concentrations of pupils in GM schools who consider that their experience of being educated had been altered fundamentally for the better as a consequence of their school having opted out, other than in terms of improved facilities and resources.

The impact of increased school autonomy, of the GM variety, on student achievement and school performance is notoriously difficult to measure for two broad reasons. First, GM schools were set no precise goals, unlike charter schools in the US. They were not set value-added targets, nor were expected to be innovative in curriculum and pedagogical terms. Second, any differences in achievement between GM and LEA schools can readily be attributed to other factors, notably the increased funding than the GM schools have received relative to their LEA counterparts, rather than to the effects of autonomy and devolved management. There is also some evidence that the social composition of schools in the GM and LEA-maintained sectors are somewhat different.

This compounds the difficulties, then, of measuring the impact of school autonomy on educational change and is signalled clearly in the following passage from the Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of schools:

> Inspections of 79 GM schools have contributed elsewhere to this report. Differences between GM and LEA-maintained schools were insubstantial in most respects, including the standards of achievement of pupils judged against their capabilities, pupils' personal development and behaviour, the quality of teaching and the efficiency and management of the school, and links with parents. In terms of standards of achievement judged against national expectations, standards in GM schools are somewhat higher, in part reflecting the generally more favourable socio-economic circumstances of these schools as judged by inspectors and confirmed by headteachers. In the 1993 GCSE examination 40.8% of pupils in comprehensive GM schools gained 5 or more A-C grades, and the average A-level point score was 13.7. These figures compare with 36.4% and 13.6, respectively, in LEA-maintained comprehensive schools. Extra-curricular activities, links with industry and pupils' spiritual development are frequently better in GM schools, whereas the attention given to pupils' welfare and guidance, to issues of access related to gender and ethnicity, and liaison with other schools and institutions are better in a higher proportion of LEA schools. (HMCI, 1995: para.39)

The 1996 Annual Report and personal communication with the inspectorate have confirmed these findings. Other research further supports the inspectorate's judgement. Perhaps the most telling is the research which considers whether, to what extent, GM schools have different socio-economic profiles from the LEA counterparts.

One conventional indicator of social disadvantage, employed widely in the UK, is the entitlement to Free School Meals (FSMs). This is a means tested policy that entitles children of families, below a very low threshold of income, to receive school lunches free charge. The measure is useful insofar as there is strong statistical but negative (ie the higher the proportion of FSMs, the lower the levels of attainment in GCSE) relationship between the proportion of FSMs in schools and the proportion of children (at age 16 +) attaining five or more GCSE grades A*-C, the officially endorsed and widely understood performance indicator of high achieving schools (Gorard and Fitz, 1998, forthcoming Kelly, 1996).

In an answer to a parliamentary question on this subject, the Education Secretary, David Blunkett, responded that the 1995-96 percentage of students known to be eligible for free school meals in England is highest in local maintained schools (22.6%), while comparable figures for voluntary church schools is 20.0% and in GM schools, 13.5% (cited in West, Pennell and Noden, 1997). The lower proportion of FSMs in GM schools compared with their LEA counterparts is also reported in studies by Kelly (1996) and Levacic, Hardman and Woods (1998). When these considerations are taken into account, these authors also argue that the differences in GCSE scores between GM and local maintained schools are so small that they are not statistically significant. In response to past claims, then, by advocates of GM schools that they were leading the way in raising standards, Kelly concludes that, at best, it is too early to make a judgment either way.

However, West, Pennell and Noden (1997), examine a popular criticism that GM schools have increased their percentages of students achieving GCSEs A* - C, via overt and covert, selection policies which enable them to admit higher proportions of

academically able students. Researchers and journalists have had some difficulty in obtaining from the GM sector an overview of admissions policies because there is little information held centrally, and policy varies from school to school. However, the case studies cited by West et al, document changes in admissions policies and a rise in their focus schools' examination scores, and moreover, a steeper rise than those achieved in other local schools. (West, Pennell and Noden, 1997, pp. 14-15).

As measured by FSMs then, the GM sector, as whole, is different from its LEA counterpart. The extent to which this arises from the number of GM schools in middle class areas or because GM school have brought this about via changes in their admissions policies is difficult to establish. The sector, though, does contain more academically selective grammar schools - over 60% of which have opted out - than the LEA sector. It is also our view, as our most recent research shows, that GM schools are those most commonly associated with 'opting in to the past', and thus engaged in changes which seek to align curriculum, teaching, discipline and behaviour with images of class-associated forms of 'traditional' schooling (Fitz, Halpin and Power, 1998; Halpin, Power and Fitz, 1998).

In terms of its impact on the restructuring of the education system in England and Wales, the impact of the policy has been far greater than the small number of school which opted out suggest. Most notable are its effects on the way in which education is England and Wales is governed. First, the policy has contributed to, and helped stabilise, the idea that autonomous schools can manage their own affairs efficiently. Headteachers in LEA and GM schools declare no wish to see any rolling back of the independence they now currently enjoy. Second, it has contributed to the diminished and, transformed role, which LEAs now have in the system. They no long plan and provide in the sense delegated to them in1944, rather the emphasis is support and advice, but along lines identified by their schools. The policy certainly helped create a mind-set amongst LEA officials and elected members that a service relationship now exists between them and local schools. The policy then, consolidated arrangements in which it is schools, not local bureaucracies that determine the pace and change of educational reform at the ground level. But third, the policy also represents another instrument with which central government is able, directly, to regulate what schools do, and who gets what. For the grant-providing capacity, that was integral to the policy, also became the means which government was able to give emphasis to its preferred curriculum areas, notably, science and technology (see Fitz et. al., 1998).

**Conclusion**

GM schools policy, then, in spite of the support and protection it received, failed to prevail over other pre-existing policies, networks of loyalties and long-established local patterns of use. In placing parental ballots at the heart of the process of opting out, central government found itself with relatively weak means to force the pace of the policy's implementation. Its confident expectation that parent power would push aside older forms of educational control proved unfounded, and provoked numerous policy adjustments by central government, intended to make GM status a more attractive. Government also underestimated, we believe, the loyalty of headteachers and governing bodies to their LEAs, so that less than 2000 schools commenced procedures to opt out in the policy's high period.

The policy, though, stabilized pre-existing patterns choice and diversity in the system where opting out, or the threat of doing so, often thwarted LEA plans for school reorganisation. On the other hand, our case studies also suggested that the policy had not increased choice or diversity in local settings, either. Nor were GM schools more accountable to parents than other schools. Indeed, the independence of action granted the GM headteachers, in our study, allowed them to develop important changes in admissions and the curriculum policies without consultation with parents.

Research in the UK is unable to find any straightforward connection between school autonomy of the kind enjoyed by GM schools and rising standards. For sure, it can be demonstrated that, by conventional measures, in high-stakes GCSE examinations, they are doing rather better than their LEA counterparts, but as measured by FSMs, the sector also has relatively fewer socially disadvantaged children in its secondary schools, and, in the main, its schools have been better resourced. There is also some confirmation of the claim that where examination success has risen dramatically, this is likely to be associated with changes in admissions policies, designed to generate successful academic outputs.

That being said, the policy has not been terminated entirely by Labour. In the near future it will be assimilated into a new framework of educational governance which will redress some of the existing imbalance between schools and local authorities, in which the latter will be given a greater supporting and co-ordinating role. The policy, then, is not quite extinct and it looks like surviving through its offspring schools, re-modelled, in the image of New Labour.

Notes

(1) The recurrent funding of GM schools, the Annual Maintenance Grant (AMG), had two elements. The first was the sum generated by the per capita formula operating in the LEA within which the GM school was situated. The formula is applied to all LEA and to GM schools within the administrative boundary. The second element, though, was a notional figure, also clawed back from the LEA's central funds. This sum was said to represent what the LEA would have spent on a school had it remained in LEA control. For administrative convenience, this was calculated as 16% of the figure generated by the per capita formula (ie a GM schools received 16% more than a LEA school of a similar size). It was asserted that LEAs were keeping back 16% of the total schools budget for central administration, hence the percentage selected. However, LEAs were progressively required to devolve over 90% of the total budget, and some chose to do so in advance of the edict, which meant that GM schools should have been in receipt of only an additional 5-10%. Central government, though, determined that the GM schools AMG should be cash protected, thus the claim of 'double funding'.

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